



LOCAL BOUNDARY
COMMISSION
550 West Seventh Avenue, Suite 1770
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-3510
Phone: (907) 269-4560
Fax: (907) 269-4539

State of Alaska



ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
& EARLY DEVELOPMENT
801 West Tenth Street, Suite 200
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1894
Phone: (907) 465-2800
Fax: (907) 465-4156

November 10, 2003

«PREFIX» «MAYOR»
«MUNICIPAL_NAME»
«STREET_ADDRESS»
«CITY», «STATE» «ZIP_CODE»

Dear «SALUTATION» «LAST»:

The 2003 Alaska Legislature directed the Local Boundary Commission and the Department of Education and Early Development to address matters relating to school consolidation. Specifically, the directive (page 10, section 1, chapter 83, SLA 2003) states as follows:

It is the intent of the legislature that (1) the Local Boundary Commission identify opportunities for consolidation of schools, with emphasis on school districts with fewer than 250 students, through borough incorporation, borough annexation, and other boundary changes; (2) the Local Boundary Commission work with the Department of Education and Early Development to fully examine the public policy advantages of prospective consolidations identified by the Local Boundary Commission, including projected cost savings and potential improvements in educational services made possible through greater economies of scale; and (3) the Local Boundary Commission with the Department of Education and Early Development report their findings to the legislature no later than the 30th day of the Second Session of the 23rd Legislature.

The directive calls for a report to be submitted by our two agencies to the Legislature by February 10, 2004. The enclosed letter from Senator Gary Wilken dated November 6, 2003, provides important details concerning the legislative directive.

The Local Boundary Commission and the Department of Education and Early Development are prepared to proceed with the school consolidation review as directed by the Legislature. Both agencies are sincerely interested in your views concerning the matter.

We recognize that there is a strong desire among Alaskans for independence in terms of control over fundamental services like education. Yet, we understand that a district may reach a point where it has too few students to provide suitable educational opportunities for students and reasonable financial efficiencies and economies of scale. Your views on the following two points are particularly important to us:

1. Given the considerable administrative and managerial duties associated with operating a public school district, at what point does the best interests of Alaska's children and the best interests of the general public compel school consolidation?

2. If some form of school consolidation is directed by the Alaska Legislature, what options should be considered first?

In terms of the first question, it is relevant to note that in 1986, the Alaska Legislature enacted a law (codified as Section 14.12.025 of the Alaska Statutes) prescribing that new school districts must have at least 250 students unless the Commissioner of the Department of Education determined that formation of a new district with fewer students "would be in the best interest of the state and the proposed district." AS 14.12.025, makes no reference to consolidation of existing districts. However, the directive from the 2003 Legislature does refer to the same student population threshold (i.e., less than 250 students).

No standards or criteria have ever been adopted to guide determinations when the creation of new school districts with fewer than 250 students "would be in the best interest of the state and the proposed school district." We would welcome your views on criteria that should be considered by our agencies with regard to school consolidation.

With regard to the second question, school consolidation can be brought about in a number of different ways. The enclosed letter from Senator Wilken carefully outlines a multitude of options.

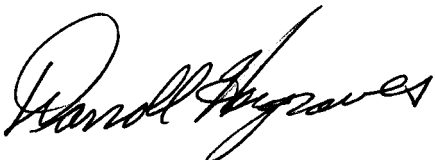
Because the 2004 legislative session is fast approaching, it would be most helpful if you submitted your comments to us by November 26, 2003. Comments may be submitted for the record to either or both of us as noted below:

Darroll Hargraves
Chair
Local Boundary Commission
550 W. 7th Avenue, Suite 1770
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-3510
fax: (907) 269-4539
e-mail: LBC@dced.state.ak.us

Roger Sampson
Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development
801 W. 10th Street, Suite 200
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1894
fax: (907) 465-4156
e-mail: Roger_Sampson@eed.state.ak.us

We look forward to your thoughtful comments regarding this crucial matter.

Cordially,



Darroll Hargraves
Chair
Local Boundary Commission



Roger Sampson
Commissioner
Department of Education and Early
Development

Enclosure: letter from Senator Wilken dated November 6, 2003

GARY WILKENSENATOR
Fairbanks**Interim:**1851 Fox Ave.
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701
Tel: 451-3501 (from Fbks)
Tel: (907) 465-3709 (outside Fbks)
Fax: (907) 465-4714**During Session:**
State Capitol Building
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1182
Tel: 451-5501 (from Fbks)
Tel: (907) 465-3709 (outside Fbks)
Fax: (907) 465-4714
Website: www.garywilken.com
E-Mail: Senator.Gary.Wilken@legis.state.ak.us

November 6, 2003

The Honorable Darroll Hargraves
Chair
Local Boundary Commission
550 West 7th Avenue, Suite 1770
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

The Honorable Roger Sampson
Commissioner
Dept. of Education
801 West 10th Street, Suite 200
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1894

Dear Commissioners Hargraves and Sampson,

I regret that I was unable to attend your meeting of October 29, 2003, in Juneau concerning the legislative directive set out in the State operating budget (page 10, Section 1, Chapter 83, SLA 2003) regarding school consolidation matters. As the author of this intent language, I want to take this opportunity to clarify what I consider to be the intent of the Legislature.

This legislative directive is independent of any proposals currently before the Legislature and consists of three distinct components. The first requires *"the Local Boundary Commission [to] identify opportunities for consolidation of schools, with emphasis on school districts with fewer than 250 students, through borough incorporation, borough annexation, and other boundary changes."*

The language regarding this first component of the directive is not intended to exclude participation by the Department of Education and Early Development. Indeed, active involvement by the Department is as critical to the fulfillment of the legislative intent for the first component as it is to the other two components of the project. In this legislative directive, student populations should be based on resident average daily membership figures.

The term "boundary changes" used in the directive is to be broadly construed in a manner consistent with constitutional records, rulings of the Alaska Supreme Court, opinions of the Attorney General's office, and the previously expressed views of the Local Boundary Commission. Specifically, "boundary changes" may include any action under the jurisdiction of the Local Boundary

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Commission (i.e., municipal incorporation, annexation, dissolution, merger, consolidation, detachment, and city reclassification). For purposes of this effort, the term may also include annexation, dissolution, merger, consolidation, and detachment to or from a regional educational attendance area.

The second component of the legislative directive requires *"the Local Boundary Commission [to] work with the Department of Education and Early Development to fully examine the public policy advantages of prospective consolidations identified by the Local Boundary Commission, including projected cost savings and potential improvements in educational services made possible through greater economies of scale."* As is reflected in the language, this component should also be a joint effort between the Local Boundary Commission and the Department of Education and Early Development. I want to stress that the language is not intended to limit the examination to just "public policy advantages" of consolidation. The review by your two agencies should be balanced and, therefore, address any public policy "disadvantages" associated with school consolidation.

The last component of the legislative directive requires *"the Local Boundary Commission with the Department of Education and Early Development [to] report their findings to the legislature no later than the 30th day of the Second Session of the 23rd Legislature."* The deadline for submission of the report to the Legislature is February 10, 2004. I recognize that both the Local Boundary Commission and the Department of Education and Early Development have heavy workloads and limited resources. Nonetheless, it would be ideal if the agencies held joint hearings in at least some of the communities that could be affected by consolidation.

Like the term "boundary changes," the term "school consolidation" should be broadly construed. There are at least three fundamental options for "school consolidation" that should be addressed in the report to the Legislature. Those are outlined below.

(1) Consolidation of particular schools. Consolidation of particular schools might occur as a result of various conditions. One of which is what I would term "indirect circumstances." An example of indirect circumstances that might lead to the consolidation of particular schools is the construction of a new road linking two nearby communities, thereby allowing consolidation of separate schools in each community into one. Since it is difficult to anticipate such indirect circumstances, there is no need to address them in the report to the Legislature.

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Consolidation of schools might also occur through formal boundary changes (e.g., combining two adjacent schools through annexation of one district or a portion of one district to another district, merger of two or more districts, reclassification of a city, et cetera). The Department of Education and Early Development should advise the Local Boundary Commission of particular schools in Alaska that might lend themselves to consolidation through boundary changes. The Local Boundary Commission should then address the prospects for accomplishing consolidation of those schools through boundary changes.

In addition, consolidation of schools might also occur under AS 14.14.110(a) which states, "When necessary to provide more efficient or more economical educational services, a district may cooperate or the [Department of Education and Early Development] may require a district to cooperate with other districts, state-operated schools, or the Bureau of Indian Affairs in providing educational or administrative services." The Department of Education and Early Development should identify opportunities for consolidation of particular schools through such circumstances. Of course, if the Local Boundary Commission has views on the topic, those views should also be considered.

(2) Consolidation of school functions. A second option for "school consolidation" involves the prospect for combining particular education-related duties and activities. Examples of such might include consolidation of professional services such as district management, accounting functions, grant writing, or fulfillment of reporting requirements for all districts in a particular region. Another example might be the opportunity for bulk purchases such as supplies or fuel for districts in a large region. While the Local Boundary Commission might have contributions to make concerning this option, the Department of Education and Early Development should take the lead with respect to the prospect of consolidation of school functions.

(3) Consolidation of specific school districts. In reviewing this option, emphasis should be placed on the prospect for consolidation of school districts with fewer than 250 students. As noted earlier, the review should be based on resident students, not correspondence students.

In its routine reporting activities, the Department of Education and Early Development has, of course, already identified districts with fewer than 250 students. In addition to this list of districts, the Department of Education and Early Development should determine whether consideration should be given to the prospect of consolidating any school district with 250 or more students. If so, the department should advise the Local Boundary Commission.

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The Local Boundary Commission should address opportunities for consolidation of school districts with fewer than 250 students and any other districts identified by the Department of Education and Early Development. Consideration should be given to the prospect of consolidation of school districts through borough incorporation; borough or REAA annexation; borough or REAA merger; borough consolidation; borough, city, or REAA dissolution; city reclassification¹ or any other means that may be appropriate. Consideration should also be given by your two agencies to possible legislative actions that would accomplish school consolidation.

I hope this letter is helpful in carrying out the respective duties of your agencies. I realize the magnitude of this task and appreciate your willingness to undertake this important review. Your arms-length analysis of our current educational system will help the Legislature to determine if there is a better way, and possibly a cheaper way, to educate Alaska's youth than our present system of 53 independent school districts.

Thank you for your time and effort and if you have questions or wish to discuss this matter, please contact me.

Sincerely,



Gary Wilken
Senator, Fairbanks

cc: The Honorable Frank Murkowski, Governor
The Honorable Gene Therriault, Senate President
The Honorable Pete Kott, Speaker of the House of Representatives
The Honorable Lyda Green, Co-Chair, Senate Finance Committee

¹The terms "REAA" and "regional educational attendance area" used in this letter include districts formed under AS 14.08.031 and "federal transfer REAAs" formed under Chapter 66 SLA 1985.

The Honorable Stanley Mack
Aleutians East Borough
P.O. Box 349
Sand Point AK 99661

The Honorable Michael Swain, Sr.
Bristol Bay Borough
P.O. Box 189
Naknek AK 99633

The Honorable Sally Smith
City & Borough of Juneau
155 South Seward Street
Juneau AK 99801

The Honorable Fred Reeder
City & Borough of Sitka
100 Lincoln Street
Sitka AK 99835

The Honorable Victoria Demmert
City & Borough of Yakutat
P.O. Box 160
Yakutat AK 99689

The Honorable David Talerico
Denali Borough
P.O. Box 480
Healy AK 99743

The Honorable Jim Whitaker
Fairbanks North Star Borough
P.O. Box 71267
Fairbanks AK 99707

The Honorable Mike Case
Haines Borough
P.O. Box 1049
Haines AK 99827

The Honorable Dale Bagley
Kenai Peninsula Borough
144 North Binkley Street
Soldotna AK 99669

The Honorable Michael Salazar
Ketchikan Gateway Borough
344 Front Street
Ketchikan AK 99901

The Honorable Gabrielle LeDoux
Kodiak Island Borough
710 Mill Bay Road
Kodiak AK 99615

The Honorable Glen Alsworth, Sr.
Lake & Peninsula Borough
P.O. Box 495
King Salmon AK 99613

The Honorable Timothy Anderson
Matanuska-Susitna Borough
350 East Dahlia Avenue
Palmer AK 99645

The Honorable Mark Begich
Municipality of Anchorage
P.O. Box 196650
Anchorage AK 99519

The Honorable George Ahmaogak, Sr.
North Slope Borough
P.O. Box 69
Barrow AK 99723

The Honorable Roswell Schaeffer, Sr.
Northwest Arctic Borough
P.O. Box 1110
Kotzebue AK 99752

The Honorable Dennis Watson
City of Craig
P.O. Box 725
Craig AK 99921

The Honorable Chris Napoli
City of Dillingham
P.O. Box 889
Dillingham AK 99576

The Honorable Russ Sweetsir
City of Galena
P.O. Box 149
Galena AK 99741

The Honorable Windy Skaflestad
City of Hoonah
P.O. Box 360
Hoonah AK 99829

The Honorable Steven Dilts, Sr.
City of Hydaburg
P.O. Box 49
Hydaburg AK 99922

The Honorable Paul Reese
City of Kake
P.O. Box 500
Kake AK 99830

The Honorable Donald L. Marvin
City of Klawock
P.O. Box 469
Klawock AK 99925

The Honorable Denise Michels
City of Nome
P.O. Box 281
Nome AK 99762

The Honorable Kathleen Wasserman
City of Pelican
P.O. Box 737
Pelican AK 99832

The Honorable Walter Johnson
City of Saint Mary's
P.O. Box 209
St. Mary's AK 99658

The Honorable Tim Bourcy
City of Skagway
P.O. Box 415
Skagway AK 99840

The Honorable Donna Folger
City of Tanana
P.O. Box 77249
Tanana AK 99777

The Honorable Pam Fitch
City of Unalaska
P.O. Box 610
Unalaska AK 99685

The Honorable Tim Joyce
City of Cordova
P.O. Box 1210
Cordova AK 99574

The Honorable Jason Mayrand
City of Nenana
P.O. Box 70
Nenana AK 99760

The Honorable Ted Smith
City of Petersburg
P.O. Box 329
Petersburg AK 99833

The Honorable Bert Cottle
City of Valdez
P.O. Box 307
Valdez AK 99686

The Honorable Valery McCandless
City of Wrangell
P.O. Box 531
Wrangell AK 99929

Mr. Kevin Ritchie, Executive Director
Alaska Municipal League
217 Second St. Suite 200
Juneau AK 99801